

Blog posts

Gone Fishin'

A BRUSSELS DIARY: PART I

Ahead of the European elections on 22 May, Betto van Waarden describes the daily routine of political decision-making in Brussels.

Exclusive 12 May, by Betto van Waarden

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"I hope you grabbed a coffee before the meeting." That's the third colleague from the European Commission who's cracked that joke this afternoon. I'm a trainee at the Directorate-General (DG) for Education and Culture of the European Commission, tagging along to the "pre-GRI meeting" — "pre-Groupe des Relations Interinstitutionnelles" — known to insiders as the world's most boring meeting.

The coordinators of 28 Commission DGs are seated at a large oval table with microphones, headsets, television screens, and a view of Brussels. At first, the meeting seems unrelated to bureaucratic consultation. It's more like a fish auction. My colleagues seem to talk only about "fishes". The German chairman from the Secretariat-General of the Commission repeatedly announces a new "fish", then a colleague describes the "fish" and other colleagues raise their hands. Does this mean whoever bids most gets the fish?

But no, my colleagues — many of whom have a strong accent when they speak English — are discussing "fiches". This is Frenchspeak, used in Eurospeak — the English of Eurocrats. (If you want to know, a fiche is a formulation of a revised Commission position with respect to its original proposal, following negotiations with the Council of the EU and the European Parliament.)

The meeting demonstrates the bureaucratic and hierarchical characteristics of the Commission. It is a small step in a vast, structured policymaking process. A policy officer revises the previous Commission position in a new fiche, based on inter-institutional negotiations with the Council and Parliament, after which numerous superiors within his or her DG, and the staff of the coordinating European Commissioner must approve it. Ultimately the fiche will be adopted

by the College of European Commissioners.

To pre-solve any possible problems with the fiche, there is first a pre-meeting to prepare for the GRI by the civil servants of the DGs; then the GRI meeting among European Commissioners' staff members responsible for inter-institutional relations; and finally the Hebdomadaire meeting of the staff chiefs of the European Commissioners to prepare for the meeting of the College. As the staffs of the European Commissioners only have time to solve a limited number of political problems, the pre-GRI civil servants do their best to solve in advance all technical and most of the political problems related to the fiches. Which makes for long technical meetings.

Naively, I thought that I had already discovered the apex of acronyms during my internship at the UN coordination centre in Washington—organisations and programmes like UNDP, UNHCR, UNCTAD, UNFPA—but now, for hours, I listen to fiches about AESM, SRM, CSD, PES. During every discussion, a few colleagues from concerned DGs respond. The others listen with one ear and wait for the conclusion of the chairman: “A point” (that means staff members of the European Commissioners need not look at it any more) or “B point” (staff members of the European Commissioners must discuss it further). Everyone virtuously jots down “A” or “B” on the note pad and carries on daydreaming.

That's how it seemed at the beginning. After a year, I get to be in the DG Education and Culture meeting seat myself. It feels like a rite of passage. “You think you're ready for your first pre-GRI?” my supervisor asks, and in an almost ceremonial fashion, my bosses wave me goodbye when I depart to the pre-GRI as the envoy of our own DG. I feel like I'm setting out into the wide world—the world of Eurocrats.

At my second pre-GRI I'm in luck: I'm asked to explain to the legal service and the other colleagues why, according to our fiche, the Commission should suddenly believe that the member state in which the next European Capital of Culture will be hosted should be allowed to nominate the candidate city before the Commission designates it? I had tried to explain this to a French colleague of the legal service over the phone, to avoid a discussion at this meeting. But as a French civil servant of the old school, she refused to speak English, which meant that as a non-French speaker and non-jurist I had to persuade her, in French, that the new Commission stance would not have negative legal implications. And the Commission's stance was not rationally explicable. Months earlier, when the battle between the Commission and Council about which institution should be entitled to designate the future Capitals of Culture was in full swing, someone had already pointed out, to no avail, that 50 km outside Brussels nobody even knows the difference between the Commission, Council and Parliament.

At the pre-GRI I start carefully: "I know that it is not logical and efficient [colleagues laugh] but it's a political symbol that is important to member states." Some colleagues look sympathetic: they are familiar with the frustrating feeling within the Commission that member states always want less EU red tape and a smaller EU budget, yet also want the Commission to do even more work, finance even more programmes and give even more political visibility to them.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. A colleague from my DG texts: "Already asleep?" I need that coffee to keep on fishing.

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